

Paying a 'living wage' is good for the whole county

By PHIL ANDREWS

VIEWPOINT

A recent visit I made to a constituent's home underscored how poverty harms educational achievement, and how the entire community benefits when workers are paid a living wage.

The constituent is a veteran public school teacher doing her best to help all of her students succeed. She told me of an encounter with a struggling student that has caused her to be very careful about her assumptions about poverty in Montgomery County.

The student had not completed her homework, and the teacher asked why. The student replied that she had to help her mother with the laundry that evening. The teacher said that was not an acceptable reason. The student explained that the family did not have a washer or dryer, and that she had to help baby-sit her younger siblings at the laundromat.

The story is a telling example of how poverty harms educational achievement. In fact, family income is the best predictor of student achievement. To close the achievement gap in Montgomery

County's schools, we need a true war on poverty, along with providing more intensive educational instruction in high-poverty schools. Otherwise, the effort will fail.

Poverty is a serious problem for our school system and for our county. At one in six county elementary schools, half or more of the students are eligible for free or reduced-price meals, because their family's annual income is less than \$27,100 for a household of three.

Shortly after being elected to the Montgomery County Council in 1998, I met with residents of Lincoln Park to affirm my commitment to work for a living wage law. I am pleased that after three years of hard work by many people, this council is going to approve a strong living wage bill.

On March 5, I introduced Bill 5-02, which is co-sponsored by Council President Steve Silverman, Council Vice President Derrick Berlage and Council members Blair Ewing and Istiah Leggett. The measure requires for-profit contractors with 10 or

more employees and contracts of \$50,000 and higher, who bid on county contracts, to pay workers on those contracts at least \$10.50 an hour (about \$21,800 a year).

The wage level is indexed to increases with the consumer price index. A contractor could receive a dollar-for-dollar credit toward the salary requirement for the value of health insurance provided to employees working on the contract.

A worker who sees his or her wage increase by \$2 an hour as a result of this bill will see an increase in annual income of approximately \$4,000. That can make a profound difference for a working-poor family, allowing it to move from a one-bedroom to a two-bedroom apartment, or allowing the wage earner to quit a second or third job and spend time with his or her children.

Nonprofit contractors are exempt from the bill, but they would be held harmless in the bid-evaluation process if they commit to do so. Many nonprofits are trying to pay a living wage, and the county should encourage them.

A primary reason for the increased number of working-poor families is that Congress has allowed

the federal minimum wage to plummet in value in the past three decades. Moreover, Congress has not increased the minimum wage since 1997. At \$5.15 per hour — or about \$10,700 per year — the minimum wage is wholly inadequate.

This living wage is not an increase in the minimum wage, which applies to almost all workers. It's targeted toward doing a lot for a much narrower group of families. It is, however, well worth doing.

When workers are paid a living wage, we all benefit. Workers can support their families. Businesses increase productivity because of lower employee turnover. And consumers get better service.

The County Council is poised to join the dozens of other jurisdictions that have enacted living wage laws, laws that are lifting workers on government contracts out of poverty. Studies show that these laws work at minimal cost to governments, with no harm to the economy.

Someone once said that "everybody does better when everybody does better." That's what the living wage is all about.

Phil Andrews is a Democratic member of the County Council.

THE MONTGOMERY Journal

3-12-02

Publisher & President: Ryan Phillips
Executive Editor: David Farmer
Advertising Director: Cesi Myers
Circulation Director: John Droegemiller

Senior Editor: Jim Farrell
Managing Editor: Pete Pichaske
City Editor: Amy Donnellio
Sports Editor: Jake Schaller
Photo Editor: Jeff Taylor

To call The Journal:
News: (301) 816-1400
Display Ads: (301) 816-1430
Sports: (301) 816-1425
Obituaries: (301) 816-1409
Tempo: (703) 846-8327

Classifieds (800) 233-2757
Customer Service (800) 531-1223
Circulation (800) 531-1223
Accounting Dept. (703) 846-8316
Send e-mail to: mjedit@jrn1.com
On the World Wide Web:
<http://www.jrn1.com>

Subscription rates: In county Out of county
One year \$78 \$97
Six months \$42 \$55

or call for subscription information:
(800) 531-1223
customerservice@jrn1.com

